

Heartlights

The newsletter of The Compassionate Friends Foothills Chapter

Winter 2017

“The Compassionate Friends is about transforming the pain of grief into the elixir of hope. It takes people out of the isolation society imposes on the bereaved and lets them express their grief naturally. With the shedding of tears, healing comes. And the newly bereaved get to see people who have survived and are learning to live and love again.”

—Simon Stephens,
founder of
The Compassionate
Friends



The
Compassionate Friends
Foothills Chapter



Our winter 2017 issue of Heartlights is dedicated to the siblings of the children we mourn. The Compassionate Friends' mission is to assist families... (offering) friendship, understanding and hope to bereaved parents, grandparents and siblings...

Excerpted from “The Empty Chair: Seven Lessons Gained in Sibling Loss”

—by Amanda Wormann

I never meant to become any sort of expert on sibling loss. That's not a path anyone would willingly choose for themselves. Back in high school, I remember standing in the funeral home at my friend's wake. After hugging his mom and sister, I stood there thinking to myself, how will they live through this?

A few years later, I learned the hard way. I was living on the other side of the world when I got a phone call from my mom on Mother's Day telling me that my brother Warren died. It was unexpected, tragic and I was all alone. I couldn't get a flight out of Tokyo until the next day, and in those grueling, confusing and lonely moments I realized the truth is, you just do. You just live through it.

In the days and years that followed it was a crash course in living life without my brother. I quickly learned that there were no books, no articles, no nothing. Nothing that could help me learn how to cope, know how to feel, or what to expect. No one really talked about the “left over kid.”

The truth is, when my brother first passed

away, I felt like it was all about my parents. Often, I found myself and others focusing on the sadness and grief that my mom and dad must have been feeling. Sibling grief wasn't a thing, or at least that's what Google and the self-help section of the bookstore told me at the time. I was so wrong.

Our brothers and sisters are the first real relationships we have outside our parents. He was my big brother — my first friend and the first person I learned to play with, share with and laugh with. He was the first person who picked on me, fought with me and taught me forgiveness. A life without him was never in sight. And I think that's the hardest thing to get over.

It's been 10 years now, and I have learned a lot during those years. Ten years is a pretty long haul for someone who never thought they'd make it past day one as a freshly deemed 21-year-old only child. Since then, I've been lucky enough to develop beautiful friendships with a few dear friends who also lost their siblings. They feel pretty lost and

See [The Empty Chair](#), page 3

Counselor's Corner

—Marci Dunaway and Kari Riddell, Blount Memorial Counseling and CONCERN counselors

One in five children will experience the death of someone close to them by age 18 (Kenneth Doka, Editor of *OMEGA, Journal of Death and Dying*). Because of this, it is important for adults to understand how children experience grief and how to help them through this very difficult time. Some adults may mistakenly believe that children do not

really grieve because they cannot understand death, or that very young children are too young to experience grief. Others believe that talking about the deceased will somehow cause the child to experience more pain, that children should be insulated from funerals or reminders of death, or that experiencing a

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Mission

The Compassionate Friends' mission is to assist families toward the positive resolution of grief following the death of a child of any age and to provide information to help others be supportive.

The Compassionate Friends is a national non-profit, self-help support organization that offers friendship, understanding and hope to bereaved parents, grandparents and siblings. There is no religious affiliation, and there are no membership dues or fees.

The **secret** of The Compassionate Friends is simple. As seasoned grievers reach out to the newly bereaved, energy that has been directed inward begins to flow outward, and both are helped to heal.

The **vision** of The Compassionate Friends is that everyone who needs us will find us, and everyone who finds us will be helped.

Barbara Lasater – professional advisor
Cindy Turner – outreach coordinator
Betty McBrayer – newsletter coordinator

The Compassionate Friends Foothills Chapter appreciates the support of our community. There is no cost to participate in the chapter's activities, though donations always are welcome.

For more information about The Compassionate Friends, visit www.compassionatefriends.org.

Contact Us

If you have questions about The Compassionate Friends Foothills Chapter or would like to submit information for the next newsletter, call 865-984-4223, e-mail tcffoothills@com or mail to The Compassionate Friends Foothills Chapter, c/o Blount Memorial Counseling and CONCERN, 262 Cherokee Professional Park, Maryville, TN 37804.

*“To live in hearts we leave behind
is not to die.”*

—Thomas Campbell

MARK YOUR CALENDAR

- **Monday, Jan. 23** – The Compassionate Friends Foothills Chapter meeting, 6:30 p.m. in the Blount Memorial Hospital auditorium
- **Monday, Feb. 27** – The Compassionate Friends Foothills Chapter meeting, 6:30 p.m. in the Blount Memorial Hospital auditorium
- **Monday, March 27** – The Compassionate Friends Foothills Chapter meeting, 6:30 p.m. in the Blount Memorial Hospital auditorium

A Letter from the Editor

In this issue, we are addressing the idea of helping children deal with the death of a loved one. It differs, of course, according to their age and their relationship to the loved one. We must pick and choose the things that relate to each specific child.

Most importantly, be sensitive to their feelings. They are not always easy to express. Ask questions, and/or answer their questions, even the hard ones, with concrete words. Terms such as “passed away” or “losing” someone can be confusing to a child. Be direct, using words such as “died” or “killed.”

Allow for saying goodbye. At a memorial service, children can see how their loved one was loved and honored by others. Let them experience the memorial service, write a letter to put in the casket, release a balloon or visit the cemetery. Later choices may include planting a flower or a tree, lighting a candle, or keeping a journal of their thoughts and feelings. Some children may want to display photos, others may not.

Have conversations about the person who died. Help them know the person lives on and will have an influence in their lives. Let them choose a memory.

Respect the way they grieve, open-

ly or privately. Keep from making judgmental statements. Children, like adults, move at their own pace. There is no “should” or “shouldn't.”

Validate their feelings, helping them to feel safe.

Children also need time to take a break from their grief. Let them know it's okay to play, have fun and laugh, and that it is not disrespectful to the person who has died. He/she would want them to, and is happy for them.*

Our son, Russ, was unmarried, but he left six devoted nieces and nephews, ranging in age from less than 1 year old to the teen years. We wanted to do our best to help them have special memories of their time with him. We continue to remember him at family gatherings by lighting a candle in his memory, and he is automatically part of our conversations. On the first anniversary of his death, for Christmas, I gave each of them scrapbook/photo albums of his interactions in each of their lives.

—by Betty McBrayer, Russ's Mom

*Betty researched helping children grieve on the National Center for Grieving Children and Families website and found “35 Ways to Help a Grieving Child” particularly helpful.

The Empty Chair, *cont. from page 1*

alone sometimes, too. Why doesn't anyone talk about this?

Somehow I made it this far. Maybe not easily, perhaps not always graciously, but I am here. And if you're reading this, you are here, too. It's my hope that these lessons I've learned can help in your darkest days to find the silver lining. Even if it's just a small glimmering glimpse of hope, you can find comfort in knowing that those we love continue to be our life's teacher long after they're gone.

■ **You don't have to be a super kid.** For some reason, especially in the beginning, you feel like you have to take on everything and suddenly save the world. Your world is your family, and you feel like you have to save your parents. I have learned that you can't save them; they are living and breathing just like you and me, and there is no saving. There is only being. The best thing you can do for your family is to be you, do things that make you feel alive and be present. Find happiness, and help others. The best thing you can be will always be you.

■ **Parents are human.** We spend our whole lives putting our parents on a pedestal. But as we get older and go through our own hardships, we come to see our parents as human. Coping with losing a child is something I hope I never experience in my lifetime, and when I look back on what my parents went through, I remember the ups and downs of it all. There were times I could see they were grieving and coping in their own way, then grieving together and now being stronger than I've seen them in years. I think losing a child can make or break a marriage, and I'm so grateful that my parents have pushed through all of this and have gained a deeper respect for each other in the process. They are my strength, my rock and my inspiration.

■ **Life goes on.** Sometimes it feels tragic to think about, but life really does go on. It's hard to imagine life without the people we love and how wrong it is that he or she will not be on the sidelines

cheering for us as we move through life. My brother didn't get to see me graduate from college, he never knew the career I built for myself, and he'll never be at my wedding or see me have kids. I'll never be Aunt Amanda to his children; he won't be there to comfort me when the day comes that I have to say goodbye to my parents. These choose-your-own-adventure missed milestones can be heartbreakingly overwhelming at times. But life does go on. I have friends that never knew him. I have a boyfriend that never met him. I've lived in one of the world's biggest cities; I've lived in a tiny cabin in the woods. I wonder what he'd be like, what he'd be doing, where he'd be living. I wonder what he'd think of me. I carry his sense of wonder with me in everything I do, but it's my way of keeping him with me while living a life I know he'd be proud of.

■ **There is no such thing as closure.** The empty chair will always be there. In our family, we are reminded of it every time we have dinner at the kitchen table and every time the three of us go out to dinner and get seated at a table for four. Something and

someone is always missing. But now I look at that chair and think to myself all I've learned, all I've gained and how far we've all come. You will always be stronger than you think.

■ **Make time for people who matter.** Every one of us has the same 24 hours in a day, the same seven days a week, 365 days a year. It's up to us how we spend this currency. We can either feel sorry for ourselves or feel grateful for all the people in our life. The people that love you love you. They love the real you, the you you've always been, the you that you're continuously improving, and the you that you will become.

■ **Anything can happen.** Anything happens all the time. Life is short, life is scary and life is beautiful. Through loss, we are shown firsthand how all of it can go away in a split second. Perhaps the greatest gift and struggle I've dealt with is wanting to live every second. Sometimes this gift of knowing how delicate life is can start to feel too real. It makes you feel stuck, anxious and scared of losing everyone you love. Sometimes I hold on too tight and worry too much. But in the end, if you choose to live, beautiful things begin to happen.

Connect with Other Bereaved Parents, Grandparents and Siblings Everyday on TCF's Online Support Community

The Compassionate Friends offers "virtual chapters" through an Online Support Community (live chats). This program was established to encourage connecting and sharing among parents, grandparents and siblings (over the age of 18) grieving the death of a child. The chat rooms supply support, encouragement and friendship. The friendly atmosphere encourages conversation among friends; friends who understand the emotions you're experiencing. There are general bereavement sessions, as well as more specific sessions.

To find out more, visit:

www.compassionatefriends.org/Find_Support/Online-Community/Online_Support.aspx

The Compassionate Friends Sounds of the Siblings (for bereaved siblings)

Moderators: Tracy Milne and Keith Singer

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/21358475781/>

TCF – Sibling Loss to Substance-Related Causes

Moderators: Andrea Keller and Barbara Allen

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1516508415263760/>

Counselor's Corner, *continued from page 1*

death during childhood leads to problems as an adult. This article will dispel some of these myths and provide information of what might be expected as children grieve.

Pre-school: Children at this stage are concrete thinkers, meaning it will take time for them to understand that death is a permanent process. They may ask the same questions over and over. Children at this age are also very egocentric, and may believe they did something or caused the death in some way. Their grief reaction may be brief but very intense. Their behavior may regress to that of a younger state, or they may have difficulty separating from a parent or caregiver. They also may experience sleep disturbances, bedwetting or anger outbursts.

Elementary School: At this stage, children are developing a better understanding that death is permanent. They may talk about the person's death not being fair, or they may develop a fascination with details about the death or with death in general. If they hear that "good people" are taken by death, they may act out to avoid themselves being taken, as well. It is common to see behavior changes at this age that are similar to those seen in younger children, but they may have a tendency to withdraw more, and they may express a wish to be with the person who has died. School-aged children also may have problems with concentration that may affect school performance.

Adolescents: At this age, death is commonly viewed as something that will happen to others, but will not happen to them. As such, they are more likely to engage in risky behaviors in an attempt to "tempt" death. While the emotions they may experience may be similar to those experienced by younger children (anger, fear, guilt, etc.), these emotions may be more intense than younger children, and they may be afraid of being seen as weak if they express these emotions. While they may withdraw more than is typical for

them, it is important that adults continue to make themselves available. A survey of teens found that when asked what the most helpful things were after the death of their family member, 55 percent said spending time with family was most helpful (<https://childrengrieve.org/national-poll-bereaved-children-teenagers>).

Just as with adults, there is no one way for children to grieve or a specific timeframe for the grieving process. To help children at any age, it is important to be available to talk and answer their questions. Young children sometimes better express their thoughts and feelings through play or art, so spending time with them in these kinds of activities can be extremely helpful. Books such as "Saying Goodbye to Lulu" by Corinne Demas, "Being Sad When Someone Dies" by Anne Fitzgerald and Linus Mundy, and "I Miss You: A First Look At Death" by Pat Thomas are good tools for helping to navigate this process. It also is important to be available for physical comfort through hugs and cuddles if children indicate that they want this kind of attention. Lastly, maintaining structure and consistency in everyday routines is helpful to provide a sense of normalcy in a very uncertain and difficult time. Remember that it is okay to be open and honest with your own feelings, as well. They should be given clear, age-appropriate information. Children need to feel safe, cared for and loved. It is okay to acknowledge that grief hurts, but do not try to rescue your children from the pain. Help them to understand that grief is a normal and natural reaction to loss, and do not try to isolate them from the grieving process. Know that grief usually lasts far longer than anyone expects, and it may take months or even years to fully come to terms with the loss. It is important to remember that death and grieving are normal parts of life, and though we do not "get over" grief, we can grow "through" it and discover that love never goes away.

 **Those Who Know** —by Georgia Cockerham

The circle forms as each walks in.
Our monthly meeting gathers again.
Sorry for the reason we are all here.
And grateful for an understanding ear.

We say our name and that of our child.
Share circumstances beyond our control.
At first – so hard to think and then talk.
Don't want to be here. Turn back the clock.

Deep grief, raw pain, all come seeking why?
Many ask why their child had to die?
The answer, we learn, is not to be found.
A simple question, and yet so profound.

Inconceivable loss. Why did we not know
Our child could die before we could go?
Sitting together, we are Those Who Know.
Understanding your cry- "How can it be so?"

Here you'll find others among Those Who Know.
Navigating life broken – no longer whole.
As the amputee learns to move without limb,
We will help you to start living again.

As years go by, meetings come and go.
From our loss of many more we now know.
Zach, Jessie, Sean, Kyle, Kevin and Ron
Different ages and causes, but all now gone.

Lee, Steve, Sandy, Chase, McCaleb, and Jeff,
You guide us in helping those new to this test.
In remembering you we give what we can,
Believing that, someday, we'll you again.

The meeting helped us and we're here again,
As new bereaved parents in a fog, walk in.
We are living proof that you will survive.
We are Those Who Know — our children
have died.

*Georgia Cockerham, Zach's Mom, is a TCF
Northwest Coast Chapter Leader and Oregon
Regional Coordinator*